

A HISTORY OF EUROPE

*from the Invasions to the
XVI Century*

by

HENRI PIRENNE

*Sometime Member of the Académie Royale de Belgique, Associate
of the Académie des Inscriptions de France,
Sometime Professor Emeritus of the
University of Gand*

London

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A HISTORY OF EUROPE

by the same author

MOHAMMED AND CHARLEMAGNE

The book which contains Pirenne's celebrated theories of the close of the ancient world and the rise of the Middle Ages. Also translated by Bernard Miall

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PREFACE

ON March 18th, 1916, about nine o'clock in the morning, a German officer of the Army of Occupation called at the house in which my father, M. Henri Pirenne, was then living (in the Rue Neuve Saint-Pierre, in Gand) and requested him to follow him to the "Kommandantur." There he was received by a major, who informed him that he was to leave for Germany immediately. When my father asked him why he had been arrested, the officer confined himself to replying: "I don't know; it's an order."

My mother was allowed to come and bid her husband farewell in the presence of an officer; but his son Robert, who was then in school, was not able to come and kiss his father good-bye, for an hour after his arrest M. Pirenne was already on his way to the Crefeld Camp.

Suddenly torn from his family and friends, and obliged to leave my mother alone in a country occupied by the enemy (her health had already been shaken by the death of her son Pierre, killed on the Yser on November 3rd, 1914), my father, on his arrival at the officers' camp at Crefeld, having resolved that he would not give way to dejection, immediately set to work. As a number of Russian officers were interned in the camp, he began, with the help of one of them, to study the Russian language.

My father's internment at Crefeld was provisional only, as was that of his friend and colleague Paul Fredericq at Gütersloh, whither he had been deported on the day of my father's arrest. The German authorities had hoped, by thus arresting them, to intimidate the professors of the University of Gand, and to induce them to resume their lectures, as they had been requested. The result disappointed their expectations. The University refused to re-open its doors during the alien occupation. The consequence of this resistance was not long delayed. On May 12th, 1916, the order reached Crefeld

to transfer my father to the camp at Holzminden. His internment there influenced him profoundly.

The camp, as he describes it in his *Souvenirs de captivité*, "contained at this time from eight thousand to ten thousand prisoners, divided among eighty-four great wooden barracks, arranged in rows in a space of some ten acres. The central avenue, 'Avenue Joffre,' as the prisoners called it, was thronged from morning to evening by a heterogeneous crowd in which all national types and all social classes were represented, and in which every language was spoken, excepting English, for there was not a single Englishman at Holzminden.

"In the centre of the camp ten barracks enclosed by a wire trellis sheltered the women and children. Every day, between noon and three o'clock, the women were allowed to leave this enclosure. As for the children, of whom there were a certain number in the camp, one could see them, of a morning, going to the schools which certain good people had somehow managed to provide for them.

"Naturally, the bulk of this heterogeneous population consisted of men of the people. Holzminden was the receptacle into which Germany poured, pell-mell, undesirable or inconvenient persons from all the occupied countries. A barrack near that which I occupied sheltered the inmates of the prison of Loos, near Lille, among whom were a certain number of convicted murderers. With a few exceptions, all these men endured their fate with a resignation that was truly admirable. Many, in the long run, were physically debilitated; there were sick men, and neurasthenics, and a few cases of insanity; but in nearly all the mental and moral faculties remained intact. Yet many of them had already been there for two years. For that matter, these were the most resolute. They had known the miseries of the first months of the war, suffered the brutality of the sentries, endured the cold of winter in unheated barracks, and witnessed the agony of the unhappy citizens of Louvain who were thrown into the camp in September 1914. Little by little they had organized themselves. Thanks to the consignments of food from the committees in all parts of Europe

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which watched over the welfare of the prisoners, and to the parcels received from friends and relatives, the alimentary conditions had become tolerable. Clothing had been received, medicines, and books. Private initiative had got to work in a thousand ways. Some French students had had a small barrack built at their own expense, 'the University,' in which professors and engineers gave lectures, and which contained a library, whose volumes were bound by a book-binder from Brussels. Benevolent societies were organized, and schools established for the children. Cafés and even restaurants were opened. Some Catholic priests had installed a chapel in the barracks. Some Belgians had fitted up an empty space for ball games: there was a skittle alley too, and a bowling green, much frequented by players from the North of France. Not many, however, indulged in athletic sports; there was too little room, and all were weakened by captivity and lack of exercise.

"We seldom came into contact with the Germans. The General in command of the camp was hardly ever visible; he left things to his subordinate, a harsh and brutal reserve officer. The organization of the camp, which was under his supervision, was simple enough, the officials being recruited from among the prisoners themselves. There was a *chef de camp*, a *chef de district* and a *chef de baraque*, who were responsible for the discipline of the camp; and it was with them that the prisoners came into contact. Every evening a bulletin appeared, containing the orders and regulations for the following day. Only police duties were left to the soldiers and the non-commissioned officers; and they performed these duties without amenity. The barracks were constantly searched; letters were seized, and the 'guilty' persons were sent to the cells for one or more days' solitary confinement. Such punishments were an everyday matter; one would often see a notice affixed to the door of 'the University': 'Professor X— will not lecture to-day, as he is in prison.'"¹

My father found his place immediately in this strange environ-

¹ Henri Pirenne, *Souvenirs de Captivité en Allemagne*, 1921, pp. 31-35. These reminiscences appeared also in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, February 1st and 15th, 1920.

ment. As director of the benevolent society he came into contact with the most unfortunate of the prisoners, whose miseries he endeavoured to alleviate. But he devoted himself above all to the work of sustaining the morale of his companions in misfortune, by organizing two courses of lectures. "For my own part," he writes, "I delivered two courses of lectures, one on economic history for two or three hundred Russian students who were captured at Liège in August 1914, and another in which I related to my fellow-countrymen the history of their native country. I never had more attentive pupils, nor did I ever teach with such pleasure. The lectures on the history of Belgium presented a really striking spectacle. The listeners were jammed together, some perched on the palliasses which were piled up in one corner of the barrack that served as lecture-hall, others crowded together on the benches, or standing up against the boarded partitions. Some were gathered outside under the open window. Inside a suffocating heat was radiated from the tarred paper roof. Thousands of fleas were jumping all over the place, leaping in the sunlight like the drops of a very fine spray. Sometimes I fancied I could hear them, so profound was the silence of all these men, who listened while a fellow-Belgian spoke to them of their native country, recalling all the catastrophes which it had suffered and overcome. No doubt the size of my audience made the 'Kommandantur' uneasy. One day I received an order to the effect that I must discontinue my lectures. I naturally protested against a measure which was directed against myself alone among all the teachers in the camp. I sent the General a note which he promised to forward to Berlin, and this was the beginning of an interminable correspondence. For a whole fortnight I had to furnish notes and reports and explanations of every kind. At last I received permission to resume my lectures. But I had to pledge myself to deliver every night, at the *bureau du camp*, a summary of the next day's lecture, and I had to put up with the presence, among my audience, of two or three soldiers who understood French."¹

And while he was devoting himself to teaching others, my

¹ Henri Pirenne, *Souvenirs de Captivité en Allemagne*, 1921, pp. 38-39.

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father continued, under the guidance of a student, the study of the Russian language which he had begun at Crefeld.

The course of lectures on economic history which he was delivering to an audience of students led him to consider a plan which he had already been cherishing for some years: that of writing a general history of Europe; and by degrees, even in the depressing atmosphere of the camp, deprived of all comfort, and all possibility of research, he elaborated in his mind the plan of the vast synthesis of which he dreamed. He managed to obtain some of the works of certain Russian historians, the study of which was to open new horizons, and to enable him to produce a work that no historian had ever attempted to undertake unaided—a general history of Europe, expounded on the lines followed in his *Histoire de Belgique*.

My father's arrest and internment had called forth many attempts at intervention; the Academy of Amsterdam proposed that he should be interned in Holland; American professors begged that he might be sent to the University of Princeton; President Wilson, King Alfonso XIII, and the Pope had endeavoured to persuade the German Government to release him.

Eleven months before his arrest—on April 6th, 1915—the Swedish Academy had conferred upon him the title of Associate Member, though it was only in the Holzminden camp that he received the official notification of his nomination; and finally a pamphlet published by Professor Christian Nyrop of Copenhagen, on *L'Arrestation des professeurs belges et l'Université de Gand*, had moved the scholars and scientists of all the neutral countries. The German Government wished to respond to these manifestations by an act of clemency. In June 1916, it made my father an offer: he could choose, as his place of residence, one of the University cities of Germany. As he refused to leave the camp, he was transferred to Jena on August 24th, 1916.

There he found his friend Paul Fredericq, and for some months he was able to make use of the University library, and to devote himself methodically to the study of the Russian historians. But the German "clemency" proved to be ephemeral indeed. On

January 24th, 1917, the rooms of the exiles were suddenly searched, and their letters and papers seized. Brought before a colonel, the burgomaster, and the *Bezirksdirektor*, they were reproached with having abused the "hospitality of Germany." A few days later, while M. Fredericq was sent to Burgel, my father was deported to Kreuzburg on the Werra, a little Thuringian town of two thousand inhabitants, a few miles from Eisenach.

Described as "extremely dangerous," he was refused a room in the best hotel. He was installed in the "Gasthof zum Stern," where they consented to give him 'odging. "It was a large house in the market-place, opposite the church and the Rathaus, with a big tiled roof, a wide *porte cochère*, and, at the back, a courtyard enclosed by a stable, a barn and a dairy."¹

My father was able to go about as he pleased, but once every day he had to present himself before the burgomaster and give in his correspondence, which had to be censored at the *Bezirksdirektion* of Eisenach.

It was then that the work took shape of which he had elaborated the plan in the barracks of Holzminden. My father has himself described the circumstances under which it was written: "I decided immediately that I could never hold out against the monotony of my detention unless I forced myself to undertake some definite occupation, with every hour of the day reserved for its special task. I continued the study of the Russian language. . . . Every afternoon, from two o'clock to five, I went for a walk. At five o'clock I set to work on the draft of a book of which I had often thought before the war, and of which I carried the plan in my head. This occupied me until supper-time. I read the newspaper, and the day was done, and on the following day I observed the same timetable. I never departed from this regimen, whatever the weather or season. It offered me the inestimable advantage of knowing, in the morning, what I had to do until the evening. It set a barrier to my vagrant imaginings, calmed my anxieties and banished boredom. In the end I became really interested in my work. I thought about it during my solitary walks in the fields and woods. There was

¹ Henri Pirenne, *Souvenirs de Captivité en Allemagne*, 1921, p. 64.